

Earl Raab

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THE "BLAST" AGAINST BEGIN

A leading black minister in San Francisco said last week: "We have to help Americans understand the real issue in the Middle East. The real issue is not the settlements, or anything like it. The real issue is that there are groups which want to destroy Israel, no matter what it does."

The Baptist minister is part of the black-Jewish clergy association which our Board of Rabbis helped to establish this past year. He put his finger on the matter, in a way that many Jews failed to do when they saw the front-page headline in the Chronicle: "U.S. Jewish Leaders Blast Begin's Policies."

American Jewish criticism of Israeli governments is not a new invention. Indeed, not long ago, some American Jews were attacking Begin for being too flexible, and giving up too much, too fast, in the Sinai. And when the Labor government was in power, American supporters of the Begin party were criticizing the Israeli government regularly.

They never made the front page. The special excitement now results from the fact that the criticism coincides with an American/Israeli "crisis" -- and that crisis is apparently built around the issue which is the subject of the criticism: mainly, the West Bank settlements.

However, as the Baptist minister pointed out, the issue of the West Bank settlements is *not* at the center of the American/Israeli crisis. The issue of the settlements may indeed be at the center of an *internal* Israeli crisis. At least those "Jewish leaders (who) Blast Begin" believe that to be the case, along with many Israelis.

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They believe that, for the sake of its own soul and survival, Israel must move towards trading the West Bank for security. They believe that the Begin government is resisting that trade. They believe that the deliberate retention of the West Bank, at any cost, would destroy the Jewish nature of Israel.

Whether they are right or wrong, that is an issue which is central to the internal life of *Israel*. But while they are deeply critical of Begin on that score, most of them are in full agreement with Begin on issues which are central to *American* foreign policy and to the American/Israeli crisis.

The issues which are central to American foreign policy have to do with the recognition of an unreconstructed PLO and the establishment of a PLO-dominated state. If the U.S. moved in these directions, both Israel and American national interest would be seriously damaged. The PLO, an agency of the Soviet Union, is dedicated to war, to the destruction of Israel, and to anti-Western policies in the Middle East. The fundamental foreign policy issue for America is whether we over-appease the PLO and the hard-line Arab states, in the hope that they will change their character.

It is a vain hope, it won't work. Both the critics of Begin and the supporters of Begin, in Israel and in America, have virtual unanimity on that issue of American foreign policy. Do critics of Begin, out of their loving concern for the internal character of Israel, have a right to express themselves? Of course. But then it is our responsibility, and theirs, to make sure that our public officials and politicians know that there is virtual unanimity on these other issues of American foreign policy. As far as American policy is concerned, San Francisco's black Baptist minister is on the mark.

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